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SUBJECT: Uzbekistan: Feedback from the Embassy-hosted MLK Day Reception

REF: 10 TASHKENT 34; 09 STATE 131744

¶1. (U) Summary: On January 19, Post used a reception at Ambassador Norland's residence to commemorate the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr., and at the same time reach out to civil society and the human rights community regarding the Secretary's December 14 Georgetown message. Participants took the opportunity to share their stories and concerns regarding the past year. Our civil society contacts painted a bleak picture of the state of affairs in Uzbekistan, but were uniformly pleased that engagement with the GOU is on the upswing. End summary.

¶2. (U) Nearly 100 people attended the reception, including representatives from the human rights community and civil society, government officials, journalists, and members of the diplomatic community. The Ambassador spoke about King's legacy and showed a video clip of the "I have a Dream" speech. The message of the evening was that all those in the room should be on the same side, working for a fuller realization of King's dream around the world, including at home. The Ambassador drew from the Secretary's December 14 Georgetown University speech to outline the Administration's support for enduring international human rights, and pointed to A/S Posner's Dec. 18 meeting with Foreign Minister Norov in Washington.

An Appreciative Audience

¶3. (SBU) The majority of the guests were human rights activists, and they came from miles around to attend. (Note: Some even risked their personal safety by crossing a dangerous mountain pass that is the only route from the Ferghana Valley to Tashkent. The pass had been closed the day before the event due to avalanche concerns.) In addition to Ferghana, attendees came from the Bukhara, Jizzakh, Samarkand, Kashkadaryo, Surdaryo, and Navoi, and Tashkent districts.

¶4. (SBU) The activists, some of whom have expressed concerns in the past that our engagement on human rights has taken a back seat to Afghanistan-related issues, universally expressed their appreciation for the event. It is rare for so many activists to be able to gather in one place, as law enforcement normally stands in the way of such meetings. In this case, however, not one person

was stopped or questioned in advance of the event, and several people commented on how good it was to be able to speak freely to colleagues and the diplomatic community. The presence of a handful of government officials seemed to put no damper on their enthusiasm in this regard.

¶15. (SBU) Several activists spoke about increased harassment and unwanted attention from law enforcement in the months prior to the December 27 parliamentary elections. Many of these said that this trend, in fact, continues, even though the elections have passed. Despite the increased pressure, it appears that these defenders are actively pursuing their human rights agendas.

¶16. (U) Most activists and journalists voiced their support for continued engagement with the GOU. As one activist put it, "sanctions and isolation like you do to North Korea and Cuba are not the answer here. They do nothing to help and only make things worse for us."

Journalists and a Photographer Under Scrutiny

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¶17. (SBU) Some of the journalists who were recently called in to the prosecutor's office for questioning (see ref A) attended the event, as did photographer Umida Ahmedova, who is being charged with defamation and damaging Uzbekistan's image for pictures she took in connection with two documentaries: "Customs of Men and Women" and "The Burden of Virginity." Activists and fellow journalists, many of whom have had similar charges levied against them, expressed moral support and gave suggestions to their beleaguered colleagues.

¶18. (SBU) Many attendees were trying to ascertain the reason journalists had been called in for questioning. In general, media representatives are very concerned that this is the beginning of intensified pressure against independent journalists and that criminal charges will follow. Others doubted that Ahmedova would be jailed, but at least one journalist said they will be more careful about the topics they choose to write about in the future.

Official Attendance

¶19. (SBU) Of note from the official community, Sayora Rashidova, the Human Rights Ombudsman, attended, as did two MFA officials, the Deputy Director of the Religious Affairs Committee, the Deputy Prosecutor General, and the Deputy Director of Jahon, the MFA's official news vehicle.

¶10. (SBU) One MFA official remarked to the DCM, "so who are these guys, anyway?" and was surprised to be introduced to Ahmedova. Rashidova, however, did speak with some human rights activists, and observers said they had a cordial discussion. Getting activists and officials in the same room only happens once or twice a year, so any interaction between them is generally a positive thing.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) Perhaps because it is so rare that all of these people are gathered in one place, diplomats and journalists alike could not help but try to get a sense of the big picture at the event. Where are we now? Are things getting worse? Are they better? There is no consensus on the answers. As has happened in the past, authorities seem to target one issue for a while and then move on to something else. The issue on the forefront right now is certainly the calling in of the journalists. All are concerned about media freedom and about what will happen if the few remaining independent journalists cease their activities. Generally, however, it seems the tough human rights landscape remains unchanged. Some activists faced increased harassment in 2009, but this may be because they were more vocal about their issues. The fact remains that, despite the harshly controlling environment in Uzbekistan, a significant number of activists and journalists in Uzbekistan continue to carry out their work and attend functions such as this one.

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